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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Ed Sheppard, 82, West Des Moines, Iowa
Meredith Ferguson
Iowa Department for the Blind building
June 28, 2011, 9:37 AM**

Meredith Ferguson: This is Meredith Ferguson. Today I am interviewing Ed Sheppard. The date is June 28, 2011. The time is 9:37 AM. The Interview is taking place at the Iowa Department for the Blind building in downtown Des Moines.

The purpose of this interview is that it will become part of the Iowa Department for the Blind's History of Blindness in Iowa, Oral History Project. Would you like to be addressed as Ed or Mr. Sheppard?

Ed Sheppard: Ed is fine.

Ferguson: Okay. Ed, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Sheppard: Yes, you do.

Ferguson: Okay, thank you. Before we begin, could you give me your full name, and the city and state of your current residence?

Sheppard: Edward Aaron Sheppard. City and state I live in?

Ferguson: Um-hum.

Sheppard: West Des Moines, Iowa.

Ferguson: Okay, thank you. And, if you're comfortable, how old are you?

Sheppard: 82.

Ferguson: 82. Are you currently married and do you have any children?

Sheppard: I'm married. I have two children.

Ferguson: Okay. Before I start on my questions, is there anything in particular that you wanted to talk about right away?

Sheppard: No, you just ask me the questions that you're interested in and I'll respond to those.

Ferguson: Okay. Before getting into your connection with the Department for the Blind, could you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and your educational background?

Sheppard: I grew up in Boston, Massachusetts. Education background, Boston University, Leland Power School which is no longer existing; the education of working 25 years at the Iowa Department for the Blind. That was a great education.

Ferguson: (Laughter) I bet it was. So, how did you come to Iowa since you grew up in Boston?

Sheppard: Well, it's a long story. I was working in Michigan, and the outfit I worked for bought an outlet here in Des Moines. And, I decided I would like to move.

Ferguson: Okay. So, what was your major in or what kind...You got a college degree? You went to Boston.

Sheppard: Just shy of a college degree.

Ferguson: Okay. What did you study? How did you come to...?

Sheppard: I studied theatre and broadcasting; that general area. I was in that field for a number of years.

Ferguson: So, when did you start working at the Department?

Sheppard: 1969.

Ferguson: 1969. And, how did you get employed here?

Sheppard: Well, I was in the news media at the time, and I got to know the Director at the time, Kenneth Jernigan. He could sense that I went along with his philosophy regarding blindness. He offered me the job. And, I figured if I'm going to make a change in my life career may as well do it now.

Ferguson: Yeah. What job did he offer you? Was it Counselor?

Sheppard: Counselor, basically, placement work; Job Placement Counselor.

Ferguson: Oh yeah, so you helped people find jobs.

Sheppard: Yeah.

Ferguson: Okay. How long did you do that?

Sheppard: I did that for ten years, followed by fifteen years of supervisory work; Supervisor of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Ferguson: Okay. Were you living in Iowa when Jernigan first came?

Sheppard: No, he preceded me.

Ferguson: Okay. So, how did you get involved with Jernigan before you started working, before he offered you the job? Were you a newspaper writer or?

Sheppard: I covered, in the news sense, government and politics in Iowa and included this agency that's part of government. I realize that this was a rather unique agency.

Ferguson: What do you mean by unique?

Sheppard: Well, it was the way it was run, the philosophy of it. The way it succeeded in its goals and aims.

Ferguson: Okay. What was your impression of Kenneth Jernigan when you first met him and when he was offering you a job?

Sheppard: Very bright individual. Very competent, obviously, and interesting; that's about it.

Ferguson: Okay. So, you were here from 1969 until 1994?

Sheppard: The end of '94.

Ferguson: '94 is when you retired. So, you were here...Jernigan preceded you, but you were here when he left right?

Sheppard: I was here when he left?

Ferguson: Yes, when Jernigan left.

Sheppard: Yes, oh yes.

Ferguson: Are you comfortable talking a little bit about kind of what the environment was like when he left?

Sheppard: I'm fine with that.

Ferguson: Yeah? Not many people are comfortable talking about it because it is fresh in memory. Just kind of wondering, I guess, people's reactions; how they responded to when Jernigan left here at the Department or what the feel was like in Iowa in general? I do know that he, kind of, faced a lot of wrath from the newspapers. They weren't very kind.

Sheppard: Well, your question being, how did I feel?

Ferguson: Well, yeah, how did you feel? What was your impression?

Sheppard: What was my impression specifically about what?

Ferguson: About when Jernigan left, about how he left. Was he, did he feel like he was pushed away?

Sheppard: Well, I felt that it was tragic in one sense. The way things went from about 19, what, in the late '70s into the early '80s. Yes, the agency had taken a battering from the local newspaper. Unfairly, by the way, but that's for the most part, unfairly. But, the key thing, I believe, was that the Director of the agency and the person who was largely responsible for improving the rehabilitation services for the blind for the state. He had put everything into that goal and it worked. It worked very well. And, then when he was being attacked by a major newspaper, he felt that this was uncalled for. He felt extremely hurt. At some point, he began to play up the importance of loyalty. I shouldn't say at some point, because he always felt that you should be loyal to the individuals you work for and live. But, at some point, he began to question the loyalty of some of his staunchest supporters during the good years, before the problems started. This situation deteriorated to the point that he gradually lost the support of the people that had worked for and with him. That was sad. But, it was almost inevitable. For a period of several years, his feeling towards his former supporters, those who he felt were disloyal to him; his feelings for them were very negative. And, it can be fairly said that he didn't, that he would use opportunities to try to undermine this agency; his baby formerly. And, it was a very sad situation.

Ferguson: Were they called the ugly years? I've heard that term at some point.

Sheppard: I've never heard the term. I suppose it's a fairly accurate way to describe those years. I would say they started in about in 1977 and went into the early '80s; 1982,

'80, '81, '82. Those were some of the years where there was a fair amount of turmoil, not only at the agency; but in the organizations of the blind or involving the organizations for the blind.

Ferguson: By turmoil, do you just, kind of, what do you mean by turmoil? Can you maybe give an example of what was, of how it was upset?

Sheppard: Well, the organizations for the blind opposed to each other, were opposed to each other in various ways. They fought with each other. Not physically, of course. This was reflected a little bit in the staff of the agency during those so-called ugly years. The great majority of the staff here at that time could not sanction, could not buy, could, not really, go along with the idea, that the people of this agency were disloyal to Kenneth Jernigan. If anything it was, he becoming a little bit disloyal to his former colleagues. But, that's you know. But anyway, in other words, that is a way of saying that at that point the late '70s early '80s the vast majority of the staff of this agency was intent in just providing the services they were supposed to.

I will give you an example. For a while, there would be stories of the local newspaper virtually every day that reflected negatively on Kenneth Jernigan. And, we'd come to work in the morning and many of us would sit in the cafeteria before the working hours, have a cup of coffee and chat. We discussed these things, and yet as soon as 8 o'clock arrived we'd go to our various workstations and continue to focus only those services we were assigned to give our clients. In other words, yes, it was a tough time and we were being battered on almost a daily schedule, but

we persevered. And, I can honestly say that, this agency never lost its bearings during this ugly time. A lot of agencies would have folded. A lot of people would have folded. But, we pretty much withstood it all.

Ferguson: When Jernigan left, John Taylor became the Director, right?

Sheppard: Right.

Ferguson: Was there, I guess, it carried the unrest, the ugly years, you said, carried over into the '80s. How long was Taylor Director? Do you remember?

Sheppard: From 1980, oops no, 1978 to '82.

Ferguson: Okay. Do you remember any particular big challenges that Taylor faced when Jernigan left? I mean, other than trying to recover from the, like you said, the unrest with the organizations?

Sheppard: It was mostly a result from, you know, by the time Taylor took over the agency Mr. Jernigan had already "turned against him," and felt that Taylor was un-loyal to him; to Jernigan, and to the philosophies of the organization of the blind that he belonged to, the National Federation of the Blind. So, Taylor was one of the bad guys in the view of the few followers at that time that Jernigan had here. As a result they tried to, well; I don't want to say sabotage. No, not sabotage, but they tried to fight his efforts to do what he should be doing with the agency.

15:00

Ferguson: Jernigan tried to fight Taylor's efforts?

Sheppard: Jernigan's followers here. Jernigan, by that time, was in Baltimore, Maryland, but his followers here in Iowa were opposing Taylor in any way they could; in some bazaar ways. A couple of wreaths, w-r-e-a-t-h-s, were delivered to Taylor and/or supporters; wreaths that were painted black, and that is somewhat of a satanic thing. That's just another example. I mean, it was an ugly time, and so the word ugly is an apt word to use to describe those years. But anyway, during the four years that he was Director of this agency, his focus for the most part was, "Look, we had taken a beating in the press let us do what this agency is supposed to do. Let us function well, etc. etc. etc. And, he had a problem, occasionally, he would be a procrastinator and that did not help. But, then at some point I felt that the Commissioners the Board of Directors of this agency had reached a point where enough is enough. We have to get rid of this situation. So they, he resigned or they asked for his resignation.

Ferguson: Taylor resigned?

Sheppard: Yes. A new Director was hired.

Ferguson: Was that when Nancy Norman came in?

Sheppard: That's correct.

Ferguson: Can you talk a little bit when she came in? All I really know about Nancy Norman is that she was more of an administrator or was she?

Sheppard: Exactly; an administrator and a pretty good one, too. But, she never really ever involved herself deeply in the things that made this agency different, such as, the philosophy of blindness that factored so much into this operation. She felt that the staff of the agency, especially the ones that had been around for quite a few years, would maintain things like that. The philosophy, she felt, she relied on the staff to take not corrective action, but to see that things went the way they should; the good way that they had gone in previous years. So, she was not trying to tear down anything at all. There were certain groups of people within the organizations of the blind who disliked her intensely. But, you know.

Ferguson: Do you know why they disliked her? I've heard that when she came in it was a bit of controversy. People fell on either side. Do you know why?

Sheppard: Because they felt that she knew nothing about blindness, about the philosophy of the agency, and at that point, she didn't know a heck of a lot about blindness. There is no question about it. But, she was a fast learner. She knew where individuals and groups were and took that into account in her administration of the agency, and where she had questions she would turn to the older hands and get explanations. "Why is this that way?" and "Why is that this way?" So, my impression of her was quite positive.

Ferguson: Do you feel like it was the fact that they brought in an administrator instead of, maybe, promoted somebody here at the Department? Do you feel like that was a good move?

Sheppard: Well...

Ferguson: I guess, would there have been anyone here who would have, like, at the Department?

Sheppard: Be a good Director?

Ferguson: Yeah.

Sheppard: Um, there might have been, yes. It was not so much the fact that it was, that ultimately a person was hired who was not a member of the Department. It was the fact that several people who belonged to an organization of the blind applied for the position, and neither of them were hired. They felt that, the people who were members of that particular organization of the blind felt that, it was sort of a slap in the face. That, I think, was representative of the feeling at that time.

Ferguson: Do you feel because she was sighted, that had anything to do with it?

Sheppard: The ideal candidate in everything else being equal would be a blind person. A well trained blind person.

Ferguson: Okay. Why do you say that?

Sheppard: Why do I say that?

Ferguson: Yeah, just for the listeners. Because not everybody...

Sheppard: I said the word ideal not only.

Ferguson: No, but I was just wondering why you feel it would be ideal.

Sheppard: Ideally, it would be somebody who had been brought up in the philosophy of this agency that had been in effect since the late '50s. The more you know about the overall situation, the better position you are in to move things along; that ideally, yes. I'm not saying a sighted person automatically should be barred from being this or that in the agency; not at all. That would be ranked discrimination as far as that goes. But, I'm saying there is a huge plus for a blind person who is experienced; many of the things that this agency deals with or most of.

Ferguson: Okay. That makes sense. Let's see. Would you say the, going back to the ugly years when Taylor took over and then when Nancy Norman came in; was the effect of all the change, of all the tension maybe that was surfacing, was that just felt here at the Department? Like, the hub of the services, or do you feel like it might have been felt throughout Iowa? Like, for blind people in general?

Sheppard: Well, to an extent throughout Iowa, because a goodly number of clients we serve were members of one organization or the other. When I say organization I'm

talking about a consumer organization of the blind people; of and for blind people. But, it probably had more of an effect here in the immediate Des Moines area, since this is where the agency is and a lot of the people most involved and most active in organization work, live in or near this area; Des Moines.

Ferguson: Okay. You mentioned consumer organizations for the blind. Could you, maybe, name a few that come to you right away?

Sheppard: Well, the two that were closely involved with the history of this agency and history of the blind in Iowa are the, in alphabetical order, the American Council of the Blind, the National Federation of the Blind. Now, there is a third organization, Blinded Veterans of America. But, the two principle ones were the first two that I mentioned. And, I'm not denigrating the BVA, the Blinded Veterans of America, by saying that. It simply, but their focus is different than the other two organizations.

Ferguson: Okay. Can you talk about...I'm assuming when you, earlier you, referred to some of the tension between the organizations. I'm assuming it's mainly between the ACB and the NFB, right?

Sheppard: Um-hum.

Ferguson: Could you talk about, a little bit maybe, I don't know, give some of the background? I know it's a long history, so maybe, kind of, just like maybe one or two main

points about what they disagreed on and why they clashed so often?

Sheppard: Oh, what are my time constraints?

Ferguson: Um...

Sheppard: I cannot do this in the space of two, three, five minutes. It goes back many years it involved individuals.

Ferguson: Can you mention, maybe, the main different philosophy then? Just kind of narrow it down to that as to how the ACB approached something and then how the NFB approached something? Because the way I understand it, that was one of the main things.

Sheppard: That was one, yes indeed. The NFB tended to be more active than the ACB, especially in the early years. But, okay, the things that brought about the increasing animosity within the NFB, which ultimately led to the establishment of the ACB. They were expelled from the NFB, or voluntarily left as the 1950s went on, and finally formed their own organization. The animosity often resulted from the differences. You can try to build and organization in two ways. You can feel, you might feel that the best way to build an organization, maintain it, grow it, is to have a relatively small cadre of extremely committed individuals. The other way is to build up a large membership, but more diverse and perhaps not quite as committed.

30:00

Sheppard: Many people within the Federation, during the 1950s, felt that the Federation was trying to, well; the Federation was following the name of its publication, The Monitor, *The Braille Monitor*. Have you heard of that?

Ferguson: Yes.

Sheppard: What is the term monitor? What are the implications of the term? Think of the implications of the term. Think about the implications of the term monitor. “I will monitor you.” Many people within the Federation thought, “Hey!” It’s almost a case of thought control; didn’t like it. On the other hand, the committed, extremely committed members of the Federation who opposed them said, “Hey, those guys can go in all different directions. They’re not really involved in or working toward the philosophical goals that we have.” And so, it gradually became either you go after a small hard-core group that can get things done, or you go after a larger, much larger organization; membership organization where there is more diversity and the monitoring aspect is not there as nearly as much; in fact, not there period.

So, you had these two outlooks and inevitably, well, Kenneth Jernigan was definitely part of the hard-core cadre, smaller cadre. He felt better to have 500; he never said this outright for quoting. But, he felt that you were better off with 500 thoroughly hard-core activist members than you are with 50,000 who are more, I don’t know what the term is. But, I think you get the idea. So, as a result he felt when you had the other kind, the people who didn’t care that much, get rid of them.

And so, there was an awful lot of house cleaning within the Federation during those years. I use the term house cleaning, and a lot of people had a lot of animosity because of this. And, it finally boiled over in 1961 when a fairly substantial number of blind people left the convention of the organization of the National Federation of the Blind, at the convention that took place in Kansas City, Missouri and went to a nearby hotel and formed their own organization-- the American Council of the Blind, which they felt would be much more democratic. And, well, that's basically how the split began; very ugly process all the way through.

Ferguson: It sounds like it.

Sheppard: Now, I was not involved then. In fact in these years I was, I think I lived in Michigan and I had no connection with agencies serving the blind or organizations of the blind. That didn't happen until the 1960s, but anyway. But, nevertheless, there's ample historical evidence of what did go on during those years.

Ferguson: I was just going to ask you how you, since you weren't directly involved...

Sheppard: Oh, I talked to people. I talked to people who were there at the time who were directly involved from both sides. I did quite a bit of reading; reading up on what went on in publications from both sides and, you know, came to certain conclusions.

Ferguson: Sure. Could you maybe name some of the key players that you talked to on both sides? I know there's

probably a bunch of them but maybe just kind of two or three?

Sheppard: A...God...I think they're all dead. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Are they?

Sheppard: Because this happened in the early '80s when we had the rift here in Iowa and the split up within the organization, the state organization here in Iowa. That's when I started talking to people from both sides, and like I said, most of them were already fairly well up in years; and that was thirty years ago. I'm trying to remember.

Ferguson: That's okay.

Sheppard: I can't even remember some of, most of, the names of those individuals.

Ferguson: That's fine. It's been a while.

Sheppard: It did involve people from both sides and, actually, I didn't have to listen to that many from the Federation side or the Jernigan side, whatever you want to call it, because I was surrounded by that. I was close to that. The other side I had to go and get some information. How did this come about? How did it happen? What were the results? So, it was, you know, things were apparent; certain things were apparent but other things I had to search out.

Ferguson: You had to fish for it?

Sheppard: Yeah right, yeah. And, I felt that I got pretty good responses.

Ferguson: In the midst of that you mentioned a rift in Iowa in the 1980s? Can you talk a little bit about that? Do you remember a date?

Sheppard: End of May, I think it had to be the end of May, I'm not sure, of 1981.

Ferguson: Okay. I have kind of heard bits and pieces throughout, but my understanding was that it was a rift with the NFB here in Iowa, right? And then there was?

Sheppard: Yeah right. The NFB of I

Ferguson: Yes, the NFB of I.

Sheppard: The NFB of I; definitely, very definitely it was at that point the Council, the ACB, did not have, they had an Iowa affiliate. It was rather small. But, when there was the rift, if you want to call it that, the NFB did, well; they did make it plain that if you didn't follow the line you're out of the NFB. They passed out cards, which we called loyalty cards, which stated you would closely follow blah, blah. Toe the line is what it amounted to, and if not you'd not be allowed to become, to remain a member of the organization, the NFB of I. That was it. The vast majority of the group that was opposed to these close reins, r-e-i-n-s, were in effect expelled from the organization or kept out of it. And, there were other factors including a violation of the state

law, which said that if an organization is changing the date of a meeting the organization must give legal notice of that twenty-four hours prior, at least twenty-four hours prior to the meeting. And, they didn't do that. I mean they called, I say we, those of us that were in the majority at that time.

Ferguson: The NFB or the NFBI didn't call the...

Sheppard: Well, no the NF...the...this is...Oh God; this is tough. All right, the supporters, the most loyalist supporters of Kenneth Jernigan; I would say the Jernigan group of the NFBI was unhappy with the others. This goes back now to the directorship of John Taylor. They were unhappy, the Jernigan supporters were unhappy, with those who had supported John Taylor. So, there was already a split. It was the Jernigan supporters...He came in from Baltimore for that convention, that state convention where, in effect, a rump meeting was held without due notification as required by law. You know, that's a legal legality. The point is, the major point is, that it was a way for the National Federation of the Blind and its National Administration to get rid of dissenters, or people they viewed as dissenters; more or less typical of the Federation's methods of trying to enforce strong discipline within the organization.

Ferguson: I was going to ask, in your opinion, was there a difference in approach between Taylor and Jernigan? Was that...Was there really a difference in their philosophy like Jernigan seemed to claim?

Sheppard: No, not really. But, Jernigan tried to. By that point, Jernigan was trying to make Taylor look bad. He

continually accused Taylor of getting away from the Federation philosophy of blindness, a philosophy which into this very day infuses the operations of this agency. So, there was no difference, but Jernigan tried to make that point with the entity that was going on at that time. He was trying to tar and feather Taylor, with the charge that Taylor was against the philosophy of the Federation philosophy.

Ferguson: Were you...You were here working here at that time.

Sheppard: Un-huh.

Ferguson: Were you directly involved with any of this or were you kind of like an outsider watching it all happen?

Sheppard: Well, I was involved to the point that I took part in meetings, in discussions of how we should function.

45:00

Sheppard: How we can fight the attacks that first came from the Register in the 1970s and then from the Federation, the Jernigan wing of the Federation; of the Federation in Iowa? How we could deal with those things. Yeah, I was not...I'm not going to say I was a major player, but I had some role in it.

Ferguson: You were involved. Were you a member of either group at one point in time?

Sheppard: Yes. I was a member until I was, in effect, expelled.

Ferguson: So, you were a member of the NFB when the split in 1981 happened?

Sheppard: In 1981 right, yeah. And, then I became a member of...Then I became a member of the organization that was independent of the NFB that had been in effect expelled. And, then a few years after that, that organization, that independent state organization...I can't...the Iowa...Well, that independent organization affiliated, voted to affiliate with the ACB, because we're far better off as a state organization; far better off being involved in a national organization. That's the way affiliations work. That's the way organizations...State organizations that are not affiliated with a national, an active national organization, are lonely voices in the wilderness, pretty much. Don't have that much effect. Go ahead.

Ferguson: Is that separate group that you said was established; is that still a part of the ACB now?

Sheppard: Yeah, ICUB--Iowa Council of the United Blind.

Ferguson: That was the separate group that was formed?

Sheppard: Yeah. Well, that was the second group that affiliated itself with the ACB.

Ferguson: I just wanted to make sure I had that right.

Sheppard: Yeah. Well, technically it became ICUB after the affiliation. There was...I just can't remember the name of the independent organization; the name of it before it became affiliated.

Ferguson: Would I be able to, is it written down somewhere? Would I be able to find it?

Sheppard: Yeah, I think you might. You might be able to get it from Becky, or she can, if she doesn't remember, because she came here in 1980. If she doesn't remember, she may refer you to somebody who does.

Ferguson: Okay.

Sheppard: One of the disadvantages of getting old is that sometimes you can't recall things from many years ago.

Ferguson: (Laughter) That's okay. Okay, kind of going off on a different venue or a different track. Have you been involved with advocacy for the blind at all?

Sheppard: Have I been involved with what?

Ferguson: Advocacy for the blind. I'm trying to think, like, was it The Fair Labor Standards Act in the '70s? Or were you here when the White Cane Law was passed in Iowa? Were you involved in, I guess, interacting with the Legislature at all, or promoting those kinds of things?

Sheppard: Um-hum. To the extent that we used to try to, what's the term? I don't want to use the term lobby; that

**seems to have a negative connotation, you know.
(Laughter)**

Ferguson: (Laughter) Yeah and no, we failed to come up with really a better term because that's not...

Sheppard: We talked it up as much as we could. Yeah, I was not; no, I was not one of the, you know, the chief doers in that area. But, I was involved in it. This is where the organizations of the blind played a role. They are the ones primarily who contacted legislators, governors, senators, congressmen. We, our role, mostly, was providing good rehab services to clients.

Ferguson: So, the organizations were mostly involved in the advocacy part. Were...Was the ACB and the NFB both represented here at the Department? For like, membership wise with people who were involved in that, would you say? Or was the NFB had more people represent it? Does that question make sense?

Sheppard: What are you talking about now?

Ferguson: Well, I wonder how in number of followers.

Sheppard: But when? What point in time?

Ferguson: In the 1980s and then into the 1990s; because you were here until 1994.

Sheppard: Oh okay. Rephrase the question, or phrase it again.

Ferguson: How well were...Was the ACB and the NFB represented here at the Department, and then in Iowa in general, in the '80s and in the '90s?

Sheppard: Well, following the turmoil of the early '80s the Council had the greater numbers. Now, it's hard to tell because a lot of people were turned off by the fighting between the organizations and decided, "I don't want any of this" and have remained unaffiliated with any organization. I don't think there's really any source that has honest figures about membership of the two organizations; how they compare here in Iowa or here at the agency. At the agency, nobody is asked, "Are you a member?" Or they shouldn't be asked, "Are you a member of this organization or that organization?" Now, there's some ways getting around it but, and some people have tried that; to get around those ways, but it doesn't happen that often.

Ferguson: Would you, in your opinion. Is the NFB or the ACB more popular on a national level? Have you followed that at all?

Sheppard: Popular?

Ferguson: Yeah.

Sheppard: What do you mean by popular? Do you mean numbers or what?

Ferguson: Well, no. Because numbers are, like you said, numbers don't really matter a whole lot. I guess, in terms of publicity. Do you hear more about the NFB or the ACB?

Sheppard: I don't honestly know. Really, I don't feel qualified to answer that question.

Ferguson: That's okay. Let's see. Okay, I also wanted to ask you about your job that you did. You mentioned you were essentially a Job Placement Counselor, right?

Sheppard: Yep.

Ferguson: Right? How or do you think the job opportunities for blind people in Iowa, do you think they have changed since '69 to '94, for example, when you worked here. Did you see an expansion in opportunities, like different types of careers and jobs opening up for blind individuals?

Sheppard: That came...Yes, that process continued, but the big movement in that area started shortly after Jernigan became Director here; '58 he became the Director here. Between '58 and '64 there was an enormous improvement in the functioning of this agency and the effectiveness of this agency of the Commission for the Blind, as it was known then. The Department for the Blind, as it is known now. Blind people were hired for jobs that were never performed by blind people previously. This happened quite often. In other words, a lot of new ground was broken. An awful lot of new ground was broken right here in Iowa.

You know, this would be a good time for me to add my own opinion, but I think it is the opinion that is shared by

quite a few other people. When you look at the overall history of this agency, and of the organizations of the blind here in Iowa during certain times, like during the late '70s or the '80s; there was a lot of turmoil, infighting. There was a lot of frustration and disappointment with certain individuals. For example, the Director of the agency, the longtime Director, Kenneth Jernigan, in the view of many people went from nearly a god to an enemy over the space of a few years. And, yes he made mistakes; political mistakes in the late '70s and early '80s, but there's one thing that nobody should lose sight of. And, I'm talking about people who should know what happened here or people who do know what happened. The thing that you shouldn't lose sight of is the fact that he largely led the effort to instill a positive philosophy regarding blindness; one that worked and to this day works. The people of this state, and especially the blind people of this state, should never forget. Yeah, he made mistakes. Yeah, he was almost hated at some point, but you cannot deny what he did and he should be given full credit for it. Of course, he's been dead for going on thirteen years. So, we're sitting here and I'm trying to fill you in on certain questions that you have. I don't have an agenda in doing that. I recognize that he did great things in the agency and he did bad things here, but you can never deny the great things that he did; and that is what has had the greatest impact overall. You can take it back now and ask your own questions. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Okay. Were there, I guess, what I was trying to get with the job question in general; were there any big career tracks that you noticed that blind people really started going after when you were working here?

1:00:00

Sheppard: Well, starting, oh I don't know. In the '60s even, maybe, in the late '50s computer science became a field in which quite a few blind people found a niche. And, computer science enabled a lot of blind people to function on jobs that they could have never functioned at, or on, or in without the help of computer science. You've probably seen it yourself here in the time you've been here; optical scanners and stuff like that. It's, so a lot of it has to do with computer science.

The other fields, let's see. I've been out of the field of placement now for sixteen years. So, what I recall is probably outdated. I don't recall that much. Oh the field that blind people are involved in; there are so many fields actually. You've got blind doctors, mostly psychiatrists who have blind people involved in work that you'd never suspected a blind person to do. For example, I'll turn this back on you. You'd probably...How long have you been an intern here?

Ferguson: Come August it will be a year.

Sheppard: Oh that long?

Ferguson: Um-hum.

Sheppard: Okay, all right, okay. When you think about it during that year, think about the ideas you had prior to that, you had prior to the beginning of that year and the ideas you have now and the truths that you have picked up since then

and during that year. It's an ongoing process and yet there's an awful lot, a lot to be done really, because...Mainly in the education of the public. Not only the sighted public but even some of the blind; a few of the blind people who just don't understand or have had an opportunity to learn or what the possibilities are or can be, anyway. Give me another question.

Ferguson: Let's see. I think I've run through most of the questions. Those are the main ones that.

Sheppard: Okay.

Ferguson: Is there anything else that's popped up that you'd like to add?

Sheppard: Well, you know, I...When I say this, I'm not saying this in a conceded way, or whatever. But, the 25 years or so that I worked here were among the most, what's the term, enjoyable? All right, yeah, but also I learned a lot. Most instructors...I learned a lot about people. You know, to go through this, the interesting times of the '70s and '80s you learn about people. You learn about politics, not on the grand scale. I'm not talking about presidential elections or anything like, that but you learn about how politics are playing on the local and the local scale and between people of different ideas. That is, hey, that is very valuable. I feel that I am a better-rounded person today than I was, well, in 1969 when I first came here as a comparably young man.

Ferguson: Okay.

Sheppard: As an intern....You can shut that off if you want to, I don't care.

Ferguson: Yep. No I'll go ahead.

1:06:04

(End of Recording)

Deb Brix

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